



Not a notion but a way

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1. Introduction

God, words and us is a good thing to have done, thoughtful, worth reading but, for me, ultimately disappointing, an opportunity missed. Maybe focussing on the language that divides us was necessary, and the light this book shines on the nature of that division is valuable. But it feels to me that it got trapped by its own success and never got past a fundamental assumption which guaranteed its eventual limitations.

The key, mistaken, assumption is that what we need to talk about as Quakers is what we *believe*. That's not the right way to look for what unites us as Quakers. After all, the *single* thing we can confidently say unites Britain Yearly Meeting is that we go to Meeting for Worship. Our identity is not determined by what we *believe*, but by what we *do*.

If you only look at the language of belief, you miss a whole different way of looking at religious identity. Choices with respect to the language of belief are what distinguish many, even most, Christian denominations, but that's something Quakers have stood aside from: we don't do creeds. And we're not the only religion that isn't best understood in terms of belief, and recognising that points us towards a better way to distinguish ourselves, by shifting the focus from belief to practice, from *orthodoxy* to *orthopraxy*.

I don't claim originality in suggesting this: John Punshon pretty much writes exactly this in QF&P 20.18, and it's at the heart of what Ben Pink Dandelion has been saying for some time.

2. We already know this

Some well-known phrases make my point:

Let your life speak
Be patterns, be examples
A testimony to the grace of God as shown in the life of ...
As Friends we commit ourselves to a way of worship
... in the manner of Friends
Swear not at all
Live simply
[need a quote for equality/justice testimony]
[L]ive in the virtue of that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars

It's not surprising that, surrounded as we are by churches for whom orthodoxy is fundamental we should have fallen into adopting their language for our own internal discourse. But we need to shake that off, and embrace our distinctive nature.

Emphasising what we *do* puts us, according to Karen Armstrong, in line with the origins of the great monotheist religions:

"Religion as defined by the great sages of India, China, and the Middle East was not a notional activity but a practical one; it did not require belief in a set of doctrines but rather hard, disciplined work..."

The Case for God, 2000

Armstrong suggests that contemporary Judaism and Islam have retained their original self-definitions centred on orthopraxy ("uniformity of religious practice"), whereas Christian denominations have shifted much more towards defining themselves in terms of orthodoxy ("correct belief").

3. "And this [we know] experimentally"

But, what does that have to do with us, you may well ask? That old language may give us a warm feeling of in-group-ness when we hear it, but what does it mean to us now? It may be of intellectual interest to hear that historical Christianity and contemporary Judaism were/are founded on practice, but we're not about water baptism or keeping kosher. What's so special about Meeting for Worship that it can sustain us in unity, preserve the effectiveness of our business method and allow our disagreements about belief language to be recognised without fear?

It's simple, really. In Meeting for Worship, on a good day, we experience two things: a presence and a possibility. That's why we keep coming back, because at some level we know we need that experience.

What presence? The technical term for it is 'transcendence'. We're not very good at talking about it. We refer to a "gathered" meeting. We say "Meeting for Worship is not just meditation". We know it when it happens. It's elusive, and if we try to pin it down we lose it, that feeling that we are joined with one another into something more than just our physical co-location. Accepting that it is "not just me" isn't easy in the resolutely individualistic culture we live in today, but if there is one item of faith we *must* confess, at least to one another, it is the truth of that experience, embracing 350 years of history and hundreds of Meetings around the world today.

What possibility? The technical term for it is 'immanence'. We see and hear it in the witness of those around us: the possibility of living an inspired life. We *recognise* it most vividly when we hear authentic ministry, coming from someone we know is speaking as they live. It cannot be faked, it is unmistakable, terrifying and uplifting in equal measure. It calls us to what we aspire to, here and now: These are neither historical figures, contemporary celebrities nor distant missionaries, they are each *one of us*.

This is what we need most to be talking about, and we don't need to agree about the *words* in order to get started. There's nothing *wrong* with talking about belief—it's natural to want to dig in to *why* we do what we do, and belief language creeps in to this, precisely *because* we're not sure of ourselves.

So, guard against being *consumed* in such talk, and remember that it's the *experience* that matters, and matters deeply. Its reality and its significance are *not* compromised by our unsatisfactory attempts to talk about it. We know that what we *do* works for us. So sure, keep trying to figure out why. But meantime, keep cheerfully practicing.